

Review

A History of Bartlett's Island, Mount Desert, Maine

by Esther Binnewies and Muriel Davisson; edited by Joel W. Eastman,
with an introduction by Peggy Rockefeller

(Portland, Maine: Seavey Printers, 1981), paperback, 164 pp.; maps, illustrations, tables.

Mount Desert and its satellite islands have been blessed in their historians. Lively writers, keen observers, and diligent researchers have told the varied story with zest and skill. The authors of *A History of Bartlett's Island* possess these estimable qualities, and the island of their choice rewards both their industry and our interest.

Bartlett's Island, containing about 2,000 acres, lies in Blue Hill Bay just off the west side of Mount Desert. It appears without a name on Champlain's 1607 map of the Maine coast; a Des Barres map of 1776 calls it Hog Island and pinpoints, at the north end, the cabin of the first white settlers. Christopher and Freelove Bartlett had already lived there fourteen years. In the 1790s, Christopher and three sons acquired title to 100 acres each. Two of those sons, David and Christopher Jr., married girls from Blue Hill village across the bay. From them descended most of the island's future population, whose names figure in a 24-page, seven-generation genealogical appendix to the volume.

In 1789, Bartlett's Island became part of the newly incorporated town of Mount Desert. Island men served usefully in town offices, but relations with the town were always a bit distant. You could cross the bay by boat to Blue Hill—to swap goods or court girls—a great deal easier than you could go by foot to town meeting on Mount Desert. After half-a-century of living on the far edge of town, the island's householders joined those of Hardwood and Robinson's (now Tinker's) to create the town of Seaville with about 150 people and their own schools and taxes. This experiment in independence lasted just twenty years; sad to say, few records survive.

But the heart of the story Esther Binnewies and Muriel Davisson tell—in rich, exact detail—is not geopolitical. It is the story of Bartlett's Island people—who they were, how and where they lived (and died), how they farmed or fished or went to sea, raised families, learned their letters and numbers, got through the winter, tended the sick and cared (more or less) for the poor, worshipped (mostly at home or off-island: Bartlett's never had a church), and, in short, did everything that people did who had to do it for themselves. The community

was not always harmonious, but the people mostly pulled together well. They had to, and they knew how.

If no one got rich (rumors of silver deposits in the 1880s proved false), just about everyone made do, and some could pretty regularly turn a profit. Agricultural records from the 1800s show that the good soil of a well-tilled island farm could feed a family with something to spare. Porgies, cod, and mackerel teemed in Blue Hill Bay, until reduced by overfishing. Then as now there were lobsters, mostly for canning but some for the table. And there were always clams, for human food or fish bait. It was said of David Bartlett II (1781-1844), a noted clammer, that "he felt he could not dig them up fast enough with his hoe, . . . so with his oxen he would plough the clam flats bottom up" (p. 44).

Binnewies and Davisson divide the book into four chapters: the first to get things going, the second and third for the nineteenth century, the fourth for the twentieth. With each stage, the records grow more numerous, more various, and more generous in yielding up bits of information. For digging out and setting down much previously unknown, unorganized data from diverse public and private repositories—not only about the island's people but about crops and cattle, land titles and values, taxes, life-ways, and much more—the authors deserve our thanks. Their faithful, thorough labor gives their little volume—modest in scale but large in meaning and strong in execution—a place of its own among the community histories that have enhanced the American record in recent times.

Many details spring, not from documents, but from living lips. The authors thank over fifty individuals, including Bartlett descendants (many of whom still live near the island), for sharing long-told family stories, recollections, and photographs. Anecdotes and numerous illustrations give the tale a human face and heart. How eloquently impassive, for example, are the faces in the photo (p. 80) of a gathering of twenty-two islanders at the Captain David Bartlett house in the mid-1880s! And we learn from the text that, just a few years later, one of the four boys sitting in the front row accidentally shot another of the boys in the leg while hunting partridge; the leg had to be cut off. It was a couple of other boys who took it into their heads, one winter's day, to skate to Hardwood Island. "On their return, they could hear the ice breaking behind them, and they skated 'like the devil!'" (pp. 75-76) Treasured photographs also capture the look of long-gone houses and barns, old fields, and forlorn gravestones.

The youngest marker in the island's several graveyards bears the date 1899. By then, farming and fishing no longer provided good life support. The old folks were dying off. The young folks were going away. Some farms defaulted

to the town for taxes; nobody wanted to buy them. Other islanders hung on to what they had, but the going got harder after the turn of the century. In 1880, Bartlett's Island "was at its height as an active social and economic community" (p. 61), with 109 inhabitants in 24 families (about one-tenth of Mount Desert town's total). Twenty years later, the island's economy was skidding, and the attractions of off-island life (paying jobs, roads, telephones, and so forth) were irresistible.

The twentieth century wrote a new and very different chapter in the story of Bartlett's—in fact, three new chapters. In the first of these, the island, newly discovered by well-to-do outsiders and ready to be picked off, became the pleasing summer retreat of the Loring family of Massachusetts. Between 1902 and 1929, A. P. Loring, a Massachusetts lawyer, acquired almost the whole island piece by piece (the last old family held out until the 1950s). Some of the remaining residents found work on Loring's year-round stock farm. Thus Bartlett's Island participated, for a time, in the story of summer colonization, just when the summer life of Mount Desert itself was undergoing radical change.

Then, in the mid-1930s, after Loring's death, the island was bought by three Bar Harbor men who figured to make a profit from it. "For the first time in its history," write Binnewies and Davisson, "Bartlett's Island was owned by people who used it only for its profitable resources" (p. 105). A paper company soon began lumbering the south end. Thus commenced a scenario that would play out over the next forty years, a saga of near disasters and narrow escapes we may call "The Perils of Bartlett's Island."

In the 1950s, for example, a New York businessman who had never seen the place considered proposals to "develop" the island as a "high class residential improvement" and a recreational resort (p. 111). Plans included building a bridge across the Narrows that separate Bartlett's from Mount Desert. Logging continued. In the late 1960s, the Dead River Company projected schemes of subdivision, sport, and pulping. Through the middle years of the century, the nearly deserted island seemed fated to be either denuded, or gentrified, or both.

It took Rockefeller care and Rockefeller cash to stop this sort of thing. In 1973, Peggy and David Rockefeller bought Bartlett's Island. They set about to restore or rebuild houses, clear and fence fields, and restart the farm operation. The authors' sympathy with this move is evident. They wrote *A History of Bartlett's Island* at the Rockefellers' request; the late Peggy Rockefeller contributes an engaging foreword. Thanks to the Rockefellers' concern and foresight, the island is now protected under a conservation easement held by the Maine Coast Heritage Trust. The story of Bartlett's Island since 1973 remains to be written.

This book is a worthy monument to a worthy deed. Happily, it has remained in print since publication and can be bought at Mount Desert Island bookstores.

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I close with a personal anecdote. In or about 1970, my father, my wife, and I sailed over to Bartlett's Island one summer afternoon from our home mooring in Pretty Marsh Harbor. The island was then empty of human life. We walked up from the pier through fields grown over between decaying houses. The place was dying, and not gracefully.

One house, its doors swinging open and its plaster falling, still had furniture in place. On the wall hung two good-looking framed-and-glassed art deco prints. A moral issue ensued—what used to be called a “case of conscience.” Take them or leave them? If we left these pretty things, their chances of survival seemed doubtful. If we took them, would it be stealing or saving? Besides, who would know? Did the Dead River Company care?

In the event, we photographed the prints and left them in place. The next winter, the house burned down with everything in it.

What would you have done?

Michael McGiffert
Pretty Marsh, and Williamsburg, Virginia

This is the second in a projected series of reviews of books on Mount Desert Island history.